

Today's News

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<http://chronicle.com/prm/daily/2003/08/2003082902n.htm>**New Chief Adviser on Iraqi Higher Education Is Former President of College in U.S.**By [DANIEL DEL CASTILLO](#)

The American occupation authorities governing Iraq have chosen a new senior adviser to oversee the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. John Agresto, a former president of St. John's College, in Santa Fe, N.M., was formally selected this month and is scheduled to assume his post in Baghdad in the next two weeks.

Mr. Agresto will replace Andrew P.N. Erdmann, a former member of the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Staff who left Iraq last week to begin a new appointment on the National Security Council.

Mr. Agresto's contract specifies an 18-month assignment that is extendable. "I was told the job would take anywhere from four months to forever, but it certainly can't be done in four months," he said. "The Iraqis had one of the finest systems of higher education years ago, and it's simply a question of helping them rebuild what they once had. The physical situation of the universities in some cases is fine, I've heard, and in other cases is disastrous, so they need help rebuilding their libraries down to even basics such as getting paper, chairs, and pens -- and so many computers have been lost."

As senior adviser to Iraq's higher-education ministry, Mr. Agresto will have broad powers to determine policy and set a course for the future of higher education there. He will be the higher-education minister in all but name. Iraq's former minister of higher education, who was No. 43 on a most-wanted list published by the United States, was captured earlier this year. A new Iraqi minister has yet to be chosen, and no timetable for an appointment has been announced by the occupation authorities.

U.S. officials in Baghdad welcomed news of Mr. Agresto's appointment. "John Agresto has been a president of a small liberal-arts college, and he comes in as an established administrator," said Lt. Col. Stephen Curda, a U.S. Army civil-affairs officer who will be Mr.

Agresto's deputy. "I think we're at a logical transition going from project management to focusing on university activities to move the universities up to the next level, and it's really possible to do that with his experience and knowledge."

Critics of the American authorities' control of Iraqi higher education said the appointment of an academic from outside the United States government represented measured progress toward independence for Iraqi academics and their institutions. "The replacement of Erdmann with a university professional was one of our key recommendations," said Keith Watenpaugh, a professor of Islamic history at Le Moyne College, who as part of a recent delegation to Iraq to survey its universities helped write a report, "Opening the Doors: Intellectual Life and Academic Conditions in Post-War Baghdad."

"This is a hesitant step in the right direction," he said. But "I doubt that his appointment signals any change whatsoever in the underlying colonial ethos" of the occupation authorities.

Before serving as president of St. John's College, Mr. Agresto held several senior posts, including deputy chairman, at the National Endowment for the Humanities under President Ronald Reagan. He was an early member of the National Association of Scholars, an organization that has supported tradition-minded curriculums and opposed affirmative action. Mr. Agresto, who has a Ph.D. in government from Cornell University and has written several political-science books, is also president of John Agresto and Associates, an educational-consulting firm. St. John's College is known for its traditional approach to academics centered on a great-books curriculum.

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